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Administration Is Accused Of Deceiving Press on Libya

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 2 — The Reagan Administration faced a growing controversy today over reports that it had made selective disclosures of news and "disinformation" about Libya and its leader, Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi.

The issue arose after a report by Bob Woodward in The Washington Post today that the Reagan Administration had devised a policy that included leaking to the press false information designed to convince Colonel Qaddafi that his country was about to be attacked by the United States or that he was about to be overthrown in a coup.

In a new development, Administration officials said today that the "disinformation" program did not originate with a memo written by Adm. John M. Poindexter, President Reagan's national security adviser, as The Post's account said. They said the campaign grew out of a mid-August State Department document to the White House laying out a "deception" campaign. That document represented a consensus of a series of interdepartmental meetings, the officials said.

Erroneous News Reported

The Post also said The Wall Street Journal, The Post itself and other newspapers had carried erroneous news reports "generated by the new plan."

Today the White House denied it had tried to plant false news reports, but a spokesman confirmed that the Administration had a policy designed to harass and ultimately remove Colonel Qaddafi.

In a meeting with columnists today, Mr. Reagan "challenged the veracity" of The Post's report. But he also acknowledged that there were "memos back and forth" on the subject of dealing with Libya. The President also denied that the Administration had any intention to provoke terrorists attacks by Libya.

August Memo Described

As recounted by officials today, the August memo called for a "disinformation" or "deception" campaign to bring attention to Colonel Qaddafi's continuing terrorist activities, to exaggerate his vulnerability to internal opposition and to play up the possibility of new American military action against him, according to Administration officials.

This was the first of at least three key memorandums from several different agencies that officials said recommended a disinformation plan, yet failed to specify how it would be carried out.

But a range of officials insisted today that in the meetings held to discuss these documents, the participants spoke of passing on exaggerated information only in the foreign press. Even regarding the foreign press, the officials said, neither the memorandums nor the discussions provided any guidelines on whom to contact or what exactly to say.

The result, the officials said, was that one or more of their colleagues took it upon themselves to give what they knew to be inaccurate information to the American press as well.

As these news reports appeared, the White House spokesman, Larry Speakes, "generally" confirmed them, based on what he said today was the advice of Admiral Poindexter.

Admiral Poindexter endorsed the memorandum written by the State Department after an interdepartmental meeting of a body called the Pre-Crisis Planning Group, the officials said. He then had his staff rewrite it in three pages for Mr. Reagan before a National Security Planning Group meeting. This is an informal Cabinet-level group over which Mr. Reagan presided on Aug. 14.

A Trail of Documents

This Poindexter memo thus became the second document in the trail of documents dealing with the subject of "disinformation" as a means of shaking the Qaddafi Government.

Shortly thereafter, the Poindexter memorandum was once again rewritten as a Presidential directive and

signed by Mr. Reagan. This was the third and final document on the subject, according to officials familiar with the memos.

The goals as set forth in this directive were in keeping with the long-standing policy of increasing Colonel Qaddafi's "anxiety" about his internal strength and American military power, deterring him from undertaking new acts of terrorism and ultimately toppling him from power.

The principal means outlined in the directive was the disinformation or deception campaign.

"We just didn't focus on the issue in the memos," said an official familiar with them, "but just lying to the American press is something we would never do."

'On a Collision Course'

Nonetheless, on Aug. 25, The Wall Street Journal published an article beginning, "The U.S. and Libya are on a collision course again."

The day the article appeared, a senior White House official with the President in California generally confirmed it. But officials of the Pentagon, State Department, Central Intelligence Agency and even the White House in Washington said on that day that the Journal article was an exaggeration.

The next day Mr. Speakes described reports seeking to tone down The Journal's article as the product of "mid-level State Department officials" who did not know what they were talking about. He said the real decision-makers, such as Admiral Poindexter and Secretary of State George P. Shultz, were in California.

But officials said today that Mr. Shultz was also dismayed by The Journal's article and had made his feelings known to Admiral Poindexter. That day and after, State Department spokesmen and other officials there and in other departments were careful not to endorse The Journal's article.

In any event, The Journal's report set off a spate of similar accounts about new evidence on Colonel Qaddafi's terrorist network, about the Administration's seeking to provoke Colonel Qaddafi into an attack on American ships then on a routine exercise in the eastern Mediterranean, about the colonel's sanity, and about active coup efforts in Libya. These were precisely the points officials said had been called for in the memos recommending the disinformation campaign.

Unintended Chain of Events

But the news accounts set off a chain of events that officials said was neither intended nor expected by the policy memos and discussions of mid-August. The intent, they said, was twofold. The first was to let the naval exercises and other military activity "speak for themselves." The second was to have the various rumors and threats about Colonel Qaddafi appear in the European, Middle Eastern and North African press.

In those news centers, the reports could have their impact on Colonel Qaddafi without being directly traceable to the Administration. Having the reports appear overseas would also diminish expected European concerns that the Administration was preparing to bomb Libya once again.

American planes had bombed Libya on April 14. This was done after strong evidence had accumulated about Libyan involvement in a terrorist attack against a discotheque in West Berlin, in which two Americans were killed and many wounded. Official European reaction to the American attack was sharply negative.

In mid-August the Administration was once again engaged in trying to enlist European cooperation against Libya. These efforts, officials said, were derailed by The Journal's article and similar ones that followed.

One such effort sought to enlist France in a joint military campaign in Chad to drive out Libyan forces in that country. The French Government told the State Department no after The Journal's article.

Walters Made European Tour

The other effort was by Vernon A. Walters, the chief American representative to the United Nations. He was set to tour major West European capitals to enlist support for tightening sanctions against Libya. Most news reports at that time in late August and September said, based on Administration officials, that he was carrying new and convincing evidence that Colonel Qaddafi was behind recent acts of terrorism.

Officials said Mr. Walters had no new and hard intelligence information to convey, and that in any event, the news articles had already soured the European allies on his mission.

But in California and in Washington, the battle was still raging over whether

The Journal's article was correct and whether there was hard and conclusive evidence.

At one point, Mr. Speakes said the article was "authoritative but not authorized." A senior White House official added that there was "hard evidence." He did so only after trying to say simply that the evidence was of "varying credibility."

At that time, more than a dozen officials in Washington were saying that there were "indications" of renewed terrorist activity, that these reports were stronger and weaker in different cases, but that it had become extremely difficult to prove Libyan involvement. That was because Colonel Qaddafi had apparently stopped using his embassies overseas to do the work and was working through Libyan airline offices and third parties.

Who Leaked Information?

Much of the confusion in late August and September, as again today, surrounded the question of who leaked the information in The Journal's article. White House, State Department and Pentagon officials almost unanimously pointed the finger at Howard Teicher, a member of Admiral Poindexter's staff responsible for political-military affairs. Mr. Teicher, officials said, was asked about this and responded that he had spoken to the author of The Journal's article. But he reportedly added that the author had already obtained all the basic information from other officials.

The officials said Admiral Poindexter had never accused or reprimanded Mr. Teicher.

But Mr. Speakes today continued to stand by his earlier statements that The Journal's article was "generally correct."

But the accuracy of that statement depends on the reading of The Journal's article, as Mr. Speakes sought to point out. The front page part of the article is a series of unattributed assertions about "collision," "new evidence," new military action and the like. But the continuation of the account on inside pages is stated in a more careful and restrained manner and is attributed, and the information is similar to that provided by a number of Administration officials at the time. That second part of the article was generally considered accurate then and now.

That leaves open the question of whether the exaggerated thrust of the article and of similar articles that followed was deliberately inspired by senior Administration officials as a matter of policy in accord with the disinformation campaign.

Memo's Existence Not Denied

Today, a senior Administration official did not deny the existence and authenticity of the Poindexter memo as described in The Post's report, nor did he deny that there were other memos about the disinformation effort.

"We have got an analysis going on comparing memos that we have with the story to find out exactly what memo it is," he said.

But as to disinformation campaign in the United States, he said, "That simply is not the case, and that is unequivocal."